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*“How good are economic explanations of cooperation? The role of motivation
and normativity for explaining norm-conformity”*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of the behavioural foundations of economic theory. It addresses the explanatory role of the concept of a motive for action in economics. The aim of the paper is to show the difficulty economists have to accommodate the motive of commitment into their explanatory frameworks for norm-conformity, whereby “making choices based on one’s commitments comes to be understood as a matter of making choices irrespective of any personal gain or loss” (Davis 2004: 4). One claim is that the economists’ explanation becomes analytic when assuming preferences of commitment. Another claim is that it is highly doubtful whether commitment can be represented by current frameworks while (pre-)serving the ‘folk-psychological’ idea of what is commonly understood by the idea of a commitment. Both claims lead to the conclusion that the motive of commitment does cause trouble for the rational choice theorist when it comes to explain why people conform to social norms.

I. Introduction

In recent years, a lot of work has been done to explain all different kinds of human behaviour by the standard economic model of rational choice. By extending their models and concepts, economists reacted also against the objection that the rational choice model (RCT) does not account for pro-social behaviour¹. The picture drawn by the economist of the *Homo Economicus*, a utility maximizer who only seeks for the satisfaction of his own material gains was highly criticized as being too one-sided and narrow in scope when it comes to explain cooperation. The economist’s reaction to this objection consisted in an extension of RCT. They broaden their understanding of the notion of self-interest as well as of their concepts of constraints and preferences to accommodate motives such as altruism, social concerns, and emotions in their ‘as-if-approach’. However, independently of the characteristics of whatever motive assumed, all actions explained by RCT are finally reduced to self-centred, instrumental agency which, in the first place, still aims at personal welfare-improvement².

Although a variety of reductionist arguments were given by the economist (Jolls, Sunstein and Thaler, 1998), empirical results in experimental settings of ultimatum-, dictator-, the trust game and the prisoner’s dilemma- game showed that economists often cannot predict pro-social behaviour and cooperation. Instead, empirical results proved that individuals regularly cooperate at the expense of their personal welfare-improvement (Bicchieri, 2006; Fehr/Fischbacher, 2004). Recently, economists started to explain these

¹ This is not the only objection RCT was confronted with in recent years. However, this is the objection I will be referring to in this paper.

² In this paper, the concept of welfare means the satisfaction of preferences and thus is understood in the neoclassical sense. This view of welfare is also called “preference satisfaction view” (Hausman/McPherson 2006: 120). It implies that maximizing utility leads to personal welfare-improvement. However, both notions should not be confused or considered as synonymous.

'behavioural anomalies' by assuming a social norm to be in place which guides people's behaviour and motivates them to cooperate (Bicchieri, 2006; Fehr/Fischbacher, 2004; Henrich, 2000; Basu/Weibull 2003; Conlin et al. 2003; Kahneman et al. 1986; Lindbeck et al. 1999). Consequently, despite the problem that social norms are generally a) hard to measure and b) only vaguely understood in terms of their actual influence on people's behaviour, economists increasingly started to integrate them into their frameworks (Akerlof 1982; Bicchieri, 2006; Conlin et al. 2003; Fehr et al. 1998).

The works of Bicchieri (2006) and of many other scholars in this field have to be acknowledged as highly influential and insightful. However, one can ask whether this approach provides useful explanations for cooperation. Social norms do not only provide solutions to problems of cooperation. They also make prescriptions about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. These prescriptions are derived from an accepted set of values which presents a basis for evaluation of actions within a society. This is why often some additional motives are required to be in place to make social norms efficacious. And thus, beside self-interest, there are many different motivational sources like emotions and what is often labelled as commitment or duty which can play a crucial role in the performance of actions and hence in explaining norm-conformity and cooperation (Mansbridge, 1998; Zimbardo et al., 1996).

Firstly, I argue that there is a fundamental problem in accounting for social norms by economic models which economic perspective heavily underestimates. It even contradicts the normative dimension of agency involved in norm-conformity, i.e. the capacity of a person to undertake judgements about right or wrong, good or bad independent from immediate desires or inclinations. However, this normative dimension of agency is often essential when people conform to social norms. I suggest that the motive of commitment, famously characterized by Amartya Sen (1977) and later developed in a more sophisticated way by many other scholars (Peter/Schmid, 2007), can help us to capture the normative dimension of agency involved in norm-conformity.

Secondly, as the rationale for evaluation in the economic approach is the enhancement of personal welfare, I argue that agency motivated by commitment cannot be accommodated within economic models. To overcome the explanatory shortcomings of

the behavioural foundations of RCT and in order to find ‘reasonable explanations’³ of norm-conformity, we have to analyze the normativity involved in norm-conformity and thus distinguish between different types of motivation beyond self-interest. Thereby, we will attain a better understanding of the role motivation plays in the explanation of norm-conformity.

To develop my argument I shall address the following three questions: In section II, I recapitulate how traditional or standard economic theory explains why people follow a social norm. In section III, I tackle the question of what the nature of the ‘ought’, or the type of normativity involved in norm-conformity, is and how this ‘ought’ or type of normativity relates to motivation. I will show why the motive of commitment plays a role in explaining norm-conformity and why the normativity involved in an action motivated by commitment differs from mere instrumental normativity. In section IV, I aim at demonstrating what this ‘ought’ or type of normativity involved in norm-conformity is grounded upon, by looking at Cristina Bicchieri’s account for norm-conformity. I will show why RCT, even broadly understood, cannot adequately account for norm-conformity. I conclude that there are finally two ways out of this ‘explanatory dilemma’. Either, we fully dismiss economic models when it comes to explain norm-conformity. Or we conduct a specific kind of theoretical and empirical research in this area to extend the economic model, improve our utility functions and provide better cognitive and behavioural assumptions regarding the agents. I hope to show the methodological implications of analyzing the normativity involved in norm-conformity. I shall leave the conceptual implications for later analyses.

II. Rational choice theory and its explanation of norm-conformity

To address the first question of how standard economic theory explains why people think they *ought* to follow a social norm, one must first understand how actions in general and norm-conformity in particular are explained by economists and what the economist considers a social norm to be.

³ It is questionable what is meant by ‘reasonable’ here. Common explanations are based on the well known desire/belief-couplet. They provide useful explanations of human behaviour even if, from an instrumentalist point of view, the behavioural assumptions do often not reflect people’s true motivation. However, as Sen argues, scientists do neither aim at an “assumption structure [within a theory] which is fundamentally at odds with the real world, nor at one where simplicity takes the form of naivety” (Sen, A., 1987). I will adopt Sen’s view in this paper for give an understanding of what I mean with ‘reasonable’ in this context.

The rational choice-framework is based on the behavioural assumption of instrumental rationality and agency is determined by self-interest. If the agent is instrumentally rational, his sole motive for action is assumed to be personal welfare-improvement (Davis, 2004; Sen, 1985). Consequently, the performed action is seen as a form of optimizing behaviour, taken to maximize individual utility and to satisfy personal preferences (Elster, 1989).

When rational choice theorists explain action, they focus on observable behaviour. This is because, according to the standard economic reasoning, we cannot observe people's motivation for performing a certain action. What goes on in people's heads is taken to be inaccessible and the *real* motivational force remains obscure. The economist's explanation is rather based upon what he generally assumes to be characteristic for a motive of action. His view of motivation is grounded in the concept of intentional action used in folk psychology. An intentional action is a "piece of behaviour" which derives from an intention of the individual exhibiting it (Elster 1994: 311). If the person acts instrumentally rational, his intention finally motivates, i.e. causes, the action. In this line of thought, the intention of the agent is represented by a reason an agent holds for the performance of an action. This is what distinguishes action from mere behaviour, namely that it is always done with a purpose (e.g. Anscombe 1957; Rosenberg, 1995). Reasons are modelled as being provided by mental states, i.e. the desire to do something and the belief that a certain action serves as a means to satisfy this desire (Elster, 1994; Hausman, 2005; Rosenberg, 1995). For the economist, the motive for action is thus taken to be identified by providing a reason, i.e. a desire and a belief which the agent had to perform an action. In short, "desires are the unmoved movers" for human action in RCT (Elster, 1989a: 4). The observed behaviour is attributed to the reason as its cause which means that the observed behaviour is the resulting outcome or effect of a causal process between two events, the reason and the action. So the motivational structure of an action is seen as being causal in nature (Davidson, 1963)⁴. Every action is purely instrumental, usually at the expense of other possible, non-instrumental motivations.

⁴ Note that it remains opaque and also uninteresting what the ultimate reason of a person is. The person might not be able to identify it and thinks he acted because of reason X but what really but unconsciously motivated the agent was reason Y. Or there might be a chain of reasons which jointly caused the action in question (Rosenberg, 1995).

In the vocabulary of the basic models of rational choice, the desires of the person are translated into a preference-set. The beliefs a person holds are taken to be the set of information available to the agent. To evaluate or choose the right means to achieve his end, an agent has to have a certain ordering of his preference-set. The agent orders his preferences on a scale. The measure of them is ‘utility’ and the ordering is represented by the (expected) utility attached by the agent to the different (material or immaterial) outcomes⁵. Aiming at maximizing his (expected) utility, he chooses the action which provides him with the highest (expected) utility and acts accordingly, given his preferences and information available. The results of the actions are the ideally objects of desires or, better say, objectives that satisfy the agents’ preferences. Accordingly, the satisfaction of preferences is assumed to always be the person’s main end and is therefore said to be in his/her self-interest (Hargreaves-Heap et al., 1992). The limited empirical basis for unobservable preferences or desires does not present a problem in this context. Instead, it is simply claimed that the observed action reveals the preference. And preferences reveal the motivations involved. According to this understanding, different preferences (re-)present different motives; and preferences are given in economic theory⁶.

Preferences and beliefs are required to be internally and mutually consistent to call a choice instrumentally rational (Elster, 1994). However, consistency alone does not imply any kind of normativity of the agent’s intentions in the sense that either the performed action has valuable content for the agent besides fulfilling its instrumental role or that the end is perceived as *right* in a more profound sense (Raz, 2004) – *right* in the sense that the agent believes or values it as a good or right thing, independent of what he is inclined to do or what would satisfy his preferences. There is no space for the agent considering the action itself as worth pursuing, independently of his personal preferences. What the agent evaluates or chooses as the right action goes back to the agent’s ordering of his preference-set mentioned before. And his judgement is assumed to be exclusively based on the criterion or principle of utility maximization.

⁵ To say that somebody prefers one state of affairs X to another Y “is to describe a mental state of that person which disposes her to choose actions which lead to X rather than actions which lead to Y” (Sugden, 2000).

⁶ This relates to the idea of revealed preferences where it is said that the action taken reveals the preference which motivated the action (Samuelson, 1938; Sen, 1977).

Before analyzing whether this view of instrumental rationality really fits the concept of what we think a social norm is or represents, it has to be shortly sketched what is generally understood among economists to be a social norm. There is no unified definition of a social norm used by social scientists (Hechter/Opp, 2001; Stout, 2001; Okruch, 1999). However, there are some key features or properties generally considered to be common to social norms. First, social norms are characterized as informal rules of behaviour “that people follow for some reason other than the fear of legal sanctions” (Stout 2001: 6). This means that they are not enforced by a formal agency in contrast to formal institutions, e.g. legal norms. Instead, they are often enforced by informal sanctions executed by third parties, e.g. through social forces such as the exclusion from a social group by its members (Mantzavinos, 2001). Social norms are ‘social’ in the sense that they are assumed to exist in every society, every subgroup of society and any kind of organisational structure (Kirchgässner, 2006).

In economic approaches, social norms are often modelled as part of people’s preference set. This can be either by being (a) accepted by the members of a group or society or (b) through the internalization of the social norm by the individuals through the process of socialization (Hechter/Opp, 2001; Fehr/Fischbacher, 2004). In (a), the social norm is generally realized and consciously followed by the people, i.e. conformity involves choice on the part of the agent, based upon a preference for the end for which norm-conformity is the best mean; the personal welfare is *directly* affected. In case (b), the social norm can be followed unconsciously. The norm itself is considered to be the dominant preference of the agent; personal welfare is *indirectly* affected through (positive or negative) emotions or external but informal (positive or negative) sanctioning.

Transferring the RC-conception for explaining action unto the issue of social norms draws a picture of an internal motivating source for norm-conformity that is purely instrumental in character (Opp, 1999; Coleman, 1990). The assumption of self-interest entails an instrumentally rational agent has a prudential or -as I would call it – ‘instrumental reason’ to obey the norm; norm-conformity presents the best strategy in this particular situation to achieve the agents end⁷. Being motivated in this way implies that the obedience to a social norm serves as an instrument for reaching a further end.

⁷ Bicchieri defines a prudential reason for action as “if you have a goal x and the best available means to attain x is a course of action y, then you ought to adopt y” (2006: 14). This is similar of having what I called ‘instrumental reason’ as an instrumentally rational agent.

The normativity involved in such norm-conformity, i.e. the reason why people think they ought to follow a social norm, is purely instrumental in character. In the following I will refer to ‘instrumental normativity’ in this context. And as long as individual choices are made consistently with people’s set of preferences, conformity can be explained by RCT (Bicchieri, 2006; Coleman, 1987; Elster, 1989; Stout, 2001; Woodward, 2009). However, this view excludes an explanation that conformity can be performed for its own sake or for what the social norm embodies. This is because in these explanations *all* action based on preferences always goes back to personal welfare-improvement and self-interest. This view excludes conformity performed which seems to be ‘counter-preferential’ (Sen, 1977).

In sum, the economist has a clear response to the question what motivates people to conform to social norms, i.e. what makes the conformity of a social norm normative for the individual: An instrumentally rational agent thinks that he ought to follow a social norm because it is - in one way or another - in his self-interest to do so. From this point of view, it is his choice whether he conforms to social norms or whether he ignores them, in case they do not serve his interests. But that norms are often seen as prescribing how we ought to behave in certain situations seems to be left out by this view. This leads to the question what the nature of this ‘ought’ or the type of normativity involved in norm-conformity really is. The answer, I suggest in the following section, is that the normativity involved in the norm-conformity can fundamentally differ from that of the instrumentally-driven norm-conformity described above. This happens when norm-conformity is motivated by commitment. And if commitment is accepted as a possible motivational source for conformity, explaining obedience to social norms causes trouble for the rational choice theorist.

III. The role of motivation, normativity, and the motive of commitment for explanations of norm-conformity

Aside from self-interest people can have many different motives for norm-conformity. An observed action which is in line with a social norm can be interpreted either as a form of outcome-oriented behaviour, taken to maximize individual utility and preference-satisfaction (Bicchieri, 2006; Coleman, 1987; Elster, 1989). Or it can be interpreted as prescriptions and as standards of evaluation for what counts as the right or adequate

thing to do within a society. I think that often individuals consider the conformity to social norms as normative for them because of their commitments to the values and principles the social norm embodies, i.e. what is seen as right or wrong in a group or society. And these commitments to values and principles, which shape their judgement about an action as being right or wrong, can make the performance of the action unconditional or necessary for an individual⁸. In what follows, I claim that the motive of commitment plays a crucial role to explain the normative aspect in social norms⁹.

The underlying problem of explaining norm-conformity with tools from economics is that norm-conformity seems to involve an instrumental *and* a normative aspect. A quick look over the literature allows us to pick out overlapping notions such as ‘expectations’, ‘obligatory’, ‘value-judgements’ ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and ‘authoritative’ when it comes to defining social norms (Anderson, 2000; Bicchieri, 2006, Coleman, 1987; Elster, 1989; Hechter/Opp, 2001). These normative notions suggest a type of normativity attached to norm-conformity that is different from the consistency-requirement postulated by RC-models. Social norms are not regarded as mere regularities in people’s behaviour which can be observed¹⁰. Neither are they considered to be completely contingent in the sense that people’s conformity varies fundamentally depending on their expected utilities in each situation¹¹. Instead, social norms can be seen as more or less stable “*prescriptions* that establish how one *ought* to behave” within a community (Woodward 2009: 33, my italics). They are defined as “standards of behaviour that are based on widely shared beliefs how individual group members *ought* to behave in a given situation” within the community (Fehr/Fischbacher 2004: 185, my italics). They are said to “reinforce certain patterns of behaviour ... by representing these patterns as desirable or *obligatory*” within a community (Pettit 1990: 725, my italics). In this sense, a social norm is a rule prescribing or

⁸ This assertion should not be understood as a claim for a causal relation in this context. Necessity in this sense is to be understood as a requirement of rationality or rational agency.

⁹ I have to admit that an underlying premise of the claim is the empirical statement that commitment as characterized in this essay does exist. However, to ground this claim in empirical evidence seems to be a difficult task. People’s motivations behind their actions are often seen as black boxes. There is a lot of empirical research still to be done on filtering out whether there is such a motivating force as commitment and, if yes, to disentangle this from other motives which are active at the same time the agent performs a certain action. So far, I will just assume that there is a motive of commitment in line with Sen. For references to empirical evidence see: Peter, Schmid (2007), Sen, A. (2005) and Sen, A. (1987).

¹⁰ Bicchieri (2006) contrast social norms with descriptive norms such as fashions and fads, whereas the latter are mere regularities which can be observed. According to Bicchieri and in line with my argument, what classifies collective behaviour as a descriptive or a social norm is a) the motives of the people involved and b) the expectations of the people within the community.

¹¹ There is a lot of empirical evidence that people’s conformity varies from situation to situation but generally, social norms are often observed to be stable over time.

proscribing behaviour. It presents a statement of the form of a conditional, hypothetical imperative “in situation X, you *ought* to do Y” (they are conditional only on the circumstances and not, as instrumental rationality assumes, exclusively on outcomes) or of an unconditional, categorical imperative “you should do X” (Elster 1989: 98, my *italics*).

People accept the social norm as a standard of evaluation for the behaviour on a collective level. Thus, these standards of right and wrong, i.e. the social norms themselves, have to be at least ‘passively’ approved of, if not actively ratified, enforced and followed as well as implemented by the individual¹². The important point here is that such a collective acceptance requires a shared understanding of what is regarded as socially appropriate/inappropriate among the individuals within a community (Krupka/Weber, 2008). But is it not that such a shared understanding of the required behaviour needs to have a basis for agreement, something like a standard, a principle or rationale on which an evaluation can be based? Such a basis is normally provided by certain fundamental evaluative principles or values of which the individual approves. Because of his approval, the agent uses these principles and values to evaluate and judge actions as the right/wrong thing to do and finally perform the action. These standards and principles shape the individual’s motives; they become part of what motivates the individual in performing a certain action. And this is why motives matter when it comes to explanations of norm-conformity.

The gap between standard or evaluation for judging an action as right or wrong, the agents’ motivation to perform an action he considers as the right thing to do, and the actual performance of an action can be closed by introducing the idea of commitment. Before doing so, it is important to note that especially social norms of cooperation are operative by supporting value-laden patterns such as promise-keeping and truth-telling over a period of time. Individuals and groups transform their principles and value-orientation into their individual and collective actions. Social norms such as fairness, reciprocity, and promise-keeping align people’s behaviours with their values and principles. Norm-conformity is a means for an agent to implement the values and

¹² ‘Passively approved of’ in this context means, that the existence of a norm is accepted even if people avoid situations where the conformity to a social norm would have been expected, like the example of the Ik people shows (Turnbull, 1972). Thus, even if people do not follow the social norm, its existence is common knowledge and thus not denied and can therefore be assumed to be passively accepted.

principles of that individual and/or at the same time of the group or society that he is part of. Social norms can therefore fill a gap between values and principles on the one hand and conduct on the other (Wallace et al., 2004). Values and principles are at the same time constitutive for the self-conception of groups, individuals, and their self-understanding as autonomous agents. Thus, they play a role in supporting certain virtues (Elster, 1989).

This is important because it shows the link between people's judgements and their motivation. In the case of social norms, people's conformity to them can be one way of revealing what the individual considers as being the right thing to do in a situation. In this case, the individual approves of what is seen to be right in the society. But, beyond mere approval, the individual can identify with certain values and principles that are embodied in social norms. The identification with values and principles generates commitment to them for groups and their members. In this case, one could say that people feel committed to these values and principles. And people think they ought to conform to a social norm because these represent their values and principles with which they identify apart from the fact that they are also considered to be right by the rest of the society or the members of the group. And because the individual has committed himself to these values and principles, he himself judges the conformity to a social norm as an action which is the right thing to do. Conforming to them makes it possible to reveal the agent's commitments. It represents his values and principles and thereby allows for living up to his standards. Thus, the social norm itself becomes a standard of evaluation that is based upon and is consistent with what the agent generally judges as being good or bad, right or wrong. Thus, people's norm-conformity is motivated by commitment to these values and principles in the first place.

Taking up on this idea of a social norm being a standard of evaluation for approving behaviour, the understanding of why people conform to social norms differs significantly from the notions of agency in standard economics. And this is why the understanding of the normativity or the nature of the 'ought' involved differs too. Instead of granting the agent all types of preferences as explanation for his action to find out the motivation behind norm-conformity, I argue that it is instead rather useful to analyse the normativity involved in what motivates agents to conform to social norms. I claim that we have to distinguish between two forms of normativity involved in norm-conformity: one is what

I called ‘instrumental normativity’, which is well captured by the economic framework and the notion of preferences. The second is a kind of ‘normativity of commitment’, which, so the argument goes, cannot be captured by standard economic theory. Depending on people’s motivation, economists consider conformity as being normative in either one or both of the two senses at the same time. This depends on the standard of evaluation they use. If they evaluate norm-conformity in terms of appropriateness or inappropriateness, they take the shared values as a basis for their evaluation. In this case, to follow a social norm is normative for a person, i.e. the person recognizes and accepts the normative claim that that social norm makes on him/her, because the norm embodies the principles and values the individual or group is committed to. And the “acceptance of a certain normative consideration can mould the way [one] thinks” (Millar unpublished: 1) and acts. What motivates people is indirectly the recognition of the claim the norm makes on them and directly their commitment to the principles or values embodied in the norm. Against the economists’ view, personal welfare-improvements are then not the reason for the choice of the agent; they are not what the agent aims at in the first place and thus are not what makes norm-conformity normative for them (Sen, 1977; Hausman, 2005). The appropriate motivation which captures this idea is his commitment as one possible motive for conformity to social norms. And the type of ‘normativity of commitment’ involved in this kind of norm-conformity is not instrumental in character.

Commitment provides the agent with a reason for norm-obedience; this is how his commitment motivates him to conform to a norm. But this reason is not instrumental in nature, because the agent’s judgement in these cases is not based on the principle of instrumental rationality. The agent’s performance of the action, i.e. his conformity to the social norm is independent of his personal situation; it is independent from his self-interest and his preferences. Commitment provides practical reasons that are “independent of the gains and losses for the person in case he or she acts on that reason” (Pauer-Studer 2007: 75). This is because these commitments are not based on the agent’s desires (Schmid, 2007). They do not express what the agent *wants*. Rather, if a commitment presents a reason for action this is because commitments, as Searle puts it, create *desire-independent reasons for action* (Searle, 2001).

In his article *Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory* published in 1977, Amartya Sen famously argues against the usefulness of the economist

principle of self-interest as part of the assumption structure in economic models. He claims that not all motives for action can be reduced to ultimate self-interest. He remarks that the problem with economic theory is that “there is no choice-independent way of understanding someone’s attitude towards alternatives” (Sen 1977: 323). But, he goes on to say, there is one source of action which does not involve choice in the usual sense, which is commitment.

To introduce his idea, Sen draws on a distinction between the motive of sympathy and a motive of commitment. Although a ‘pro-social’ motive, sympathy does not require a departure from individual utility maximization. Similar to acting from sympathy outlined by Kant in his *Groundwork*, an action motivated by sympathy is ultimately self-regarding, i.e. “the concern for others directly affects one’s own welfare” (Sen 1977: 326). Kant introduced the friend of mankind, who finds pleasure in spreading joy around him and who can take delight in the satisfaction of others. But Kant identifies this kind of satisfaction as an inclination like any other desire a person can have. He concludes that such an action, even if admirable, has no moral worth (Kant [1785], 1997). In contrast, an action which is motivated by duty has moral worth; it is characterized as an action performed independently of personal desires. Kant illustrates this point by describing a philanthropist acting kindly towards others. He does not have any inclination which would positively or negatively affect his state of affairs. He simply acts because duty demands it which gives the action a genuine moral worth.

Abstracting from one’s personal desires and inclinations implies that the action is not driven by them. Rather, an action motivated by commitment requires a “counterpreferential choice” from the part of the agent (Sen 1977: 328). That does not mean, that the agent is not allowed to have any kind of additional inclination which makes the action attractive for him. This just means that under at least one counterfactual condition the personal welfare under the act chosen would be unaffected¹³. Hence, the agent would unconditionally perform the action, i.e. he would have no choice in the usual sense. The person would still perform the action, even if he believes that it will yield at negative utility; he would perform it even if, at the same time, he could perform an alternative action that would make him better off. Thus, taking

¹³ It has to be noticed that it is difficult to imagine different states of the world and potential choices for action. However, I will not discuss this difficulty further here but just present the simple idea of commitment.

commitment as a possible motive for action, the identity of personal welfare and individual preferences resulting in choice no longer holds (Sen, 1977, 1985 and 2005)¹⁴. His commitment makes performing the action necessary for him for other reasons than preference-satisfaction. That means even if these inclinations or desires would not be present, he would still perform the action in question. Personal welfare-improvements are not the *reason* for the action of the agent; they are not what the agent aims at in the first place (Sen, 1977; Hausman, 2005). An action motivated by commitment is completely non-egoistic.

It seems obvious that there is a close relationship between commitment and moral agency. According to Kant, acting from duty requires a sense of moral commitment. Being committed to moral principles is a necessary precondition for acting from duty. Taking Kant's motive of duty as one 'subgroup' of the general idea of commitment, Sen's understanding of commitment is that an action motivated by commitment is *per definitionem* independent from the satisfaction of any kind of inclination or immediate desires the agent is driven by in a given moment. In the case of commitment, as is the case with actions done from duty, the agent considers the action as the *right* thing to do. Consequently, as when acting from duty, commitment requires the agent to be capable of undertaking judgment and evaluation, being self-reflected and conscious about his values and principles upon which he bases his evaluations¹⁵.

However, although morality implies commitment, morality should not be equalled or confused with it. Commitment results in the *right* action, although this does not necessarily mean that it results in what is seen as *morally right*. A person can also be committed to an ideology, a political party, or a religious view. A person can be committed to an organisation, to a social contract, to (moral) principles or to god. *Right* in this context thus just means that the agent considers the action itself (or the outcome of the action) as worth pursuing, independent of the personal benefit he can expect from the outcome of the action. And the agent comes to know that it is *the right thing to do*

¹⁴ This identity mainly depends on the underlying understanding of the concept of a preference or the nature of reasons. As claimed before, personal welfare and individual utility are (technically) equalled in mainstream economics. This assumption provides the main basis for conclusions about what we understand as a preference and what the nature of reasons is (Sen 1977 and 1985).

¹⁵ The character of commitment strongly depends on the definition of concepts. Frankfurt-minded philosophers would interpret commitment in a less evaluative and a less-cognitive way. According to Frankfurt people do not always know what they are committed to. Sometimes they believe they are committed to something they actually are not for example (e.g. Frankfurt, 1971). I just use Sen's understanding of commitment here, which seems very much in line with a Kantian view of moral agency.

because he evaluates and judges the action on the basis of the values and principles he holds while comparing possible alternative actions instead of drawing on the evaluative principle of utility-maximization. In this sense, an action motivated by commitment is, as a moral action, unconditional and stable. But it does not necessarily aim at what is the morally right thing to do.

To sum up: the idea of commitment comprises an evaluation of possible alternatives that is not necessarily carried out by basing it on moral values; instead, it can be based on any set of values the individual in question holds. However, what commitment has in common with morality, at least understood in a Kantian way, is the existence of a non-welfarist goal that is altogether removed from individual preference-satisfaction and the fulfilment of immediate inclination. The economist finds himself in an explanatory dilemma, as RCT does not allow for this kind of behaviour.

There are three ways to deal with the ensuing dilemma: Firstly, many economists simply dismiss the motive of commitment as an important motivating force for norm-conformity. But this is problematic, because commitment seems to offer a good explanation of different normative phenomena such as work motivation, solidarity bonds etc. (Pauer-Studer, 2007) and it provides a useful account of cooperation observed in experimental settings (Kerr et al., 1997)¹⁶. A second possibility is to ignore the special nature of commitment and just assume that people have a preference for commitment; these approaches explain anomalies with as-if models based on long-term calculations and self-interest. This seems plausible at first sight. As mentioned before, economists have highly elaborated upon their concepts of self-interest and preferences thanks to the openness and flexibility of the utility-function. However, assuming a preference for commitment to explain committed behaviour seems to lead to a tautological explanation which provides very little information. The *explanandum*, i.e. the event or fact to be explained is at the same time used as part of the *explanans*, i.e. the mechanism which does the explanation. A third possibility would be to take commitment seriously as a motivational force, to admit the explanatory shortcomings of the current framework and try to adapt it. In this case, the assumption of individual-welfare maximization and self-interested agency and rationality would have to be relaxed or even rejected (Sen, 1982).

¹⁶ I will not tackle the issue of providing empirical evidence for the existence of a motive of commitment in this paper. However, I am aware that this is a very delicate and important issue where a lot more work needs to be done. Interesting empirical literature is provided by Kerr et. al., 1997.

In the next section I address a recent attempt to include the normative aspect of norm-conformity into the standard economic approach of rational choice theory. It will be shown why even a very open and sophisticated model of rational choice still has troubles integrating the motive of commitment and why it is useful to take the third possibility.

IV. Bicchieri's account for social norms and the concept of normative expectations

One recent attempt at defining social norms while taking both types of normativity into account is by looking at people's expectations. People's preferences for social norms can be put in relation to normative expectations about actions that a group or the society has toward an individual or the individual has towards society. Cristina Bicchieri stresses the importance of mutual expectations involved in norm-conformity. In her *Grammar of Society* (2006) she considers a social norm to be a kind of cluster of expectations among a sufficient number of people who believe that a social norm exists and who expect that many other people will follow it in certain situations. In this sense, people have a conditional preference for norm-conformity; conditional upon expectations about other people's belief in whether an action is seen as being acceptable or unacceptable within a community.

Bicchieri's account mainly consists of the following four (individually) necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions for the existence of social norms: (1) People are collectively aware that a norm exists and that it applies to specific circumstances (contingency). (2) But the simple presence of the norm does not suffice to guarantee conformity. People also need to have a conditional preferences to conform to a social norm; conditional on (3) expectations of the following kind: A person believes that, based on past observations of other's behaviour or its consequences, the majority of the people will follow the norm as well (empirical expectations) and (4) a belief that others expect a person to conform (normative expectations) in the sense that they believe that everyone ought to conform. Here, expectations are taken to be reciprocal. Normative expectations can be accompanied by sanctions but do not have to be. The people who expect others to conform and who are willing to sanction transgressions also have to *prefer* people to conform. What brings in the instrumental aspect of norm-conformity is that people have to have a (conditional) preference for conformity and the required beliefs in addition to

the expectations. In line with the classical belief/desire-framework of rational choice theory, people are finally motivated by their preferences (Bicchieri, 2006). What brings in the normative aspect of conformity is the condition of mutually held ‘normative expectations’ about what people ought to do, based on what people consider as right or wrong. Let us look at this condition in greater detail.

The notion of mutually held ‘normative expectations’ introduces a type of normativity that differs from the mere instrumental normativity and from having a prudential reason for conformity. It implies that people not only think that others ought to conform, but that they also believe that they themselves are expected to conform in the sense that a reasonable number of people think that one *ought* to conform to the social norm. This can suffice to induce a preference for conformity when “individuals recognize the legitimacy of others’ expectations and feel an obligation to fulfil them” (2006: 15); and, once induced, a preference for conformity guarantees that people follow the social norm. But it does not need to suffice. In some cases, Bicchieri claims, potential sanctions are needed to induce a preference for conforming to the social norm. And expecting sanction might motivate either in the sense that people fear sanctions and want to avoid them or because of a desire to please others and thus be rewarded.

What is of interest for the argument here is the nature of the ‘ought’ in Bicchieri’s account. It can be implicitly contained in the normative or the empirical belief people hold about others’ expectations, i.e. people think they ought to conform because of their belief about others’ expectations. In the case of an empirical belief, people infer from my (consistent) behaviour in the past that I will do the same in the future, and that this is what I believe. If it is a normative belief things look a bit different. Although normative beliefs do not generally state an obligation, they do so in Bicchieri’s account. In this case, I believe that a sufficiently large number of people think that I have an obligation to conform to a social norm in the appropriate circumstances. This is why a person will consider other people’s expectations as legitimate. It is not a kind of instrumental normativity, because the motivation for conformity understood in this sense can but does not have to incur material or immaterial sanctions to guarantee conformity. Also, conforming to the norm does not simply serve as a means to satisfy my ends. Instead, people consider conformity to the social norm as their and other people’s obligation or duty. But why does the person accept this obligation and thus considers other people’s

expectations as legitimate? Bicchieri claims that people think that they (and others) are obliged to conform to the norm because they believe it is the right thing to do. In these cases, social norms are seen as good or reasonable. But how do people justify this obligation or, to put it differently, what is this obligation grounded upon? Bicchieri does not give a final answer. But she indicates that we have a preference to share a cake equally for example because it might be our duty to be fair. And we hold the belief that others expect us that we ought to share because it is the fair thing to do. But on what grounds do people believe that the norm of equal sharing is the right thing to do?

We could get around this problem by arguing that social norms are often not seen to be the right thing to do. But then the accepted obligation involved seems even more difficult to understand. To make her approach understandable, Bicchieri gives the following example of a Muslim woman wearing a veil: although it is a widely spread social norm, many people (in the Muslim community) might think that wearing a veil is an unpleasant thing to do and not many people would be prepared to sanction a transgression. This means, people would not consider it an obligation to conform to the norm. Each woman therefore does not necessarily believe that she ought to follow the social norm. But she might believe that she is expected to wear the veil in the sense that she believes that many people think that she ought to wear a veil and that they also prefer to wear a veil because it is an obligation or her religious duty to wear it. Because of social pressure she will finally end up wearing it; expected sanctions are necessary to guarantee conformity. Her reason to conform is thus a kind of ‘instrumental reason’ and the type of normativity involved has an instrumental nature. But let us look at this case in greater detail: what this case implies is that a religious community of extensive size would follow a norm which dramatically constrains the ‘quality of life’ of at least half of the members of the community, whereas ‘quality of life’ labels a lifestyle taken from the idea of freedom of secular western societies. And it assumes that people accept this constraint on their choices only because of other people’s expectations, which, even worse, is based on false beliefs because, as Bicchieri describes, these expectations do not really exist if we would ask people for people’s actual beliefs. What this example suggests, then, is that people live against what they really or truly value and consider as the right thing to do, simply because of a falsely believed existence of expectations.

This line of reasoning seems to suffer, however, from the following drawbacks: it is probably the case that a vast majority of Muslim women would wear the veil even if they did not fear any kind of sanctions. And this is because they do it out of a religious conviction. They have committed themselves to the values and principles of their religious community. And they believe that conformity to the social norm is one way of expressing this conviction. This commitment is why they think they ought to follow the norm and why they also expect others to conform. Such a view immediately loses its validity when people have different values. Western women would have difficulty in believing in this kind of ‘uncomfortable’ commitment. Because of their commitment to other kind of values, their motivation and the normativity involved would be different immediately, i.e. rather instrumental in character. So, the conformity to the same norm can be motivated in at least two different ways, namely either fear of sanctions or conviction and commitment to values and principles that are embodied in the norm. Consequently, why people think they ought to follow a social norm also differs. As the one is instrumental in character and guarantees conformity only by expected sanctions, the conformity of a person who is motivated in this way is *contingent*. As the other one is ‘committing’ in character and guarantees conformity also without any kind of expected sanctions (the person conforms voluntarily and unconditionally), the conformity of a person who is motivated in this way is *necessary*¹⁷.

This relates to an idea Hume raised (Hume, [1739], 1997). Sometimes norms and values or virtues appear to be related. Bicchieri claims that once norms are invoked in a society, people start to follow them because they attribute some value to what the norm stands for or they have a deep conviction of the norm. Consequently, the norm is what shapes the values of the people within a community. Accordingly, when we attribute an intrinsic value to the norm, this gives us a reason to recognize other people’s expectations as legitimate and we feel an obligation to fulfil it. These expectations cause us to have a preference and having a preference causes us to conform to the norm we value or are deeply convinced of. So their value depends on widespread conformity. This argument seems to be somewhat contradictory. We consider an action worth pursuing because its properties embody certain values and principles we already have or hold and about which we are convinced. We are committed to these values and, by following a norm, we want to implement or realize them. Consequently, it is often our values and principles that

¹⁷ As mentioned before, this assertion is to be understood as a requirement of rationality or rational agency, but which differs from instrumental rationality assumed in RCT.

shape social norms, not the other way round¹⁸. Because we are committed to the principles and values we hold, we take it as our obligation to conform to the norm. This obligation is independent, first, from our preferences and thus from what is in our self-interest and, second, from other people's expectations. So, as I claimed before, individuals draw on a basis of values and principles that people commonly hold. And because they commit themselves to these values and principles, on the one hand, they accept other people's evaluations and expectations about what kind of behaviour is considered as appropriate and find them legitimate. On the other hand, their commitment also justifies their own expectations towards other people's behaviour and their own norm-compliance.

This leads us to the last point, namely that awareness, self-reflexion and conscious deliberation are not necessary conditions for following a norm in Bicchieri's account. She claims that we often unconsciously follow social norms, while she defines a mental state to be conscious when it is accompanied by roughly simultaneous, higher-order thought about that very mental state. This understanding of awareness is reminiscent of conscious deliberation modelled in rational choice theory. In a cost-benefit-analysis, we consciously weigh our options available. In this context, deliberation is based on the beliefs and desires of which we are aware in the abovementioned sense. I believe that Bicchieri understates the importance of this kind of awareness and claims that we often make use of heuristics to 'choose' our actions, especially when it comes to norm-conformity. And she might be right in many cases. However, in the context of norm-conformity motivated by commitment, awareness also requires making judgements and it implies self-consciousness achieved by a process of deliberating about how we act on the whole. We draw on our experience of how we acted in the past and why we acted as we did to make sure that our action was worth pursuing and to adapt/improve our action in the future, having in mind certain fundamental values and principles to which we commit ourselves. As said before, because of this commitment, people use their values and principles for assessment. These values and principles for assessment are different from the notion of value implied by Bicchieri's claim that some social norms may become part

¹⁸ Empirically it is probably true that in many societies certain social norms exist before new individuals build up values that support these norms. But what was there first and how (informal) institutions evolve are question which cannot be addressed in this paper. However, I think that, if what the social norms represent or imply would be contradictory to what we consider for ourselves as acceptable and would not be more or less inline with our values, conceptions, and ideas about the world, the way we live together in a society, and how we think we should treat each other, then the majority of the people would not conform to social norms.

of our system of values, and that we may feel a strong obligation to obey them (Bicchieri, 2006). Instead, as mentioned before, the concept of commitment implies that some norm-governed actions embody people's values and principles. And because the norm embodies the values and principles we are committed to, it has a normative claim on us which is a general claim independent of the situation. So, once we judge an action as worth pursuing on the basis of our values and principles, we have the duty to pursue it; in case of social norms 'we obey ourselves' to conform. The awareness of the existence of these properties, of the fact that they provide us with a reason to act, and of the values and principles we hold is therefore crucial when we want to account for the motive of commitment.

Having sketched the methodological implications for accepting an instrumental and a normative dimension in norm-conformity, I propose that there are two ways out of this 'explanatory dilemma'. Either, we fully dismiss economic models when it comes to explaining norm-conformity. Or, we conduct further theoretical and empirical research in this specific area to extend the economic model, improve our utility functions and provide better cognitive and behavioural assumptions of the agents.

CONCLUSION

The first aim of the paper was to show that differentiating between different motives for norm-conformity beyond self-interest would provide us with a better understanding of why people think they ought to follow a social norm and thus to help us to make better explanations of such behaviour. A second aim was to show the difficulty economists have in accommodating the motive of commitment in their explanatory frameworks for norm-conformity and thus accounting for a normative dimension of agency. I argued that we have to distinguish between two forms of normativity involved in norm-conformity: one is what I called 'instrumental normativity', which is well captured by the economic framework and the notion of preferences. The second is a kind of 'normativity of commitment', which, so the argument was, cannot be captured by economic theory. Depending on people's motivation, they consider the conformity to social norms as normative either in one of the two senses or in both at the same time. The main difficulty of RCT to account for these aspects lies in its general stance towards what is meant when we say that somebody acts for a reason and what we consider as being

rational within the framework. RCT does not account either for the kind of reason we are provided with when acting from commitment, nor for what we consider as a rational in this context. Thus, if we accept commitment as a motivational source and its methodological implications, then we must challenge our notion of reasons, i.e. the nature of the desires and beliefs involved in reasons for conformity and our understanding of what it means to act rationally in this context. Of course, people's behaviour is complex and a theoretical framework will never cover all of the potential motivations for following social norms. However, I conclude that if we aim at reasonable explanations of norm-conformity, all possible motives should be considered.

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